

# ***GRAND-MOTHER-I***

A THREE-GENERATION STORY

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**GRAND-MOTHER-I: A THREE-GENERATION STORY**

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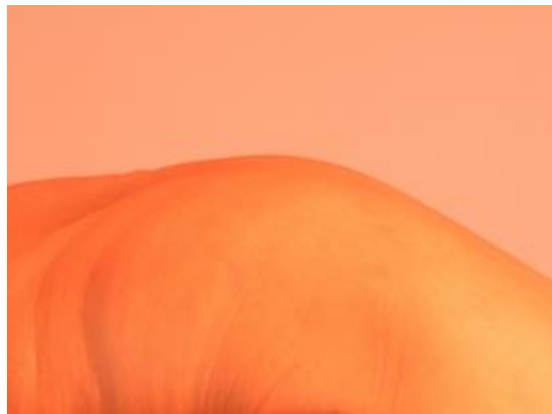
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## Introduction

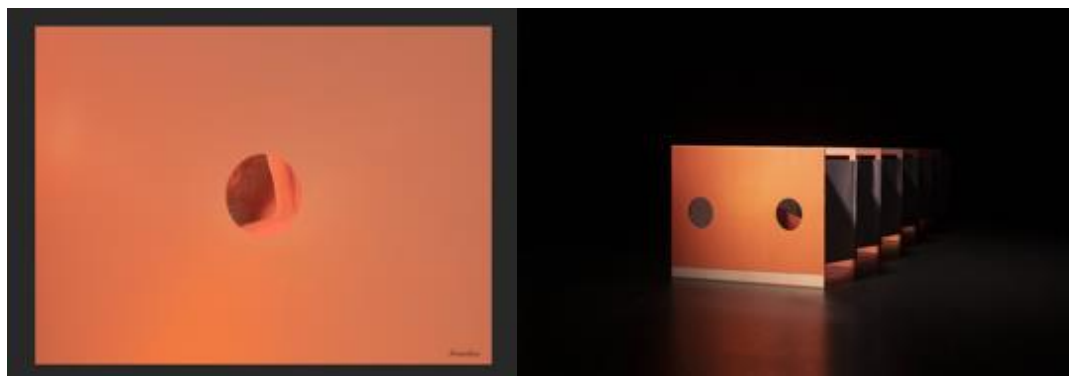
As I complete my work on this thesis, my grandmother was about to enter the last seasons of her time on Earth. This thesis is an account of a project about my grandmother, who I see now has always been present in my work.

The three generations of women in my family represent the 100-year history of Vietnam: my grandmother lived through the French, and American – Vietnam Wars, my mother witnessed Vietnam went through renovation and economic reform (Doi-moi period, starting from 1986) and the year I was born, the Internet was born, too. We are related, yet somehow utterly different.



**Figure 1 – Photograph from Desert Photo Series**

No matter how difficult it was for me to view the world as my grandmother did, I have always been fascinated about her - in a way most of my works revolved around my grandmother. As if subconsciously, she was my source of inspiration. The works that got me in Piet Zwart Institute were about her; a nude photo series of her in abstract angles. I gazed at her body and depicted as landscapes (that was the way for me to deal with her aging body.) Later on, I turned the photo series into another project, called The Desert Photobook. Inspired by 18-century peepshows, I replicated a way of peeping at my grandmother's layers of skin, one person at a time, through a peep-hole - I wanted to create a way to intimately and privately observe grandmother's body.



**Figure 2 - The Desert Photobook**

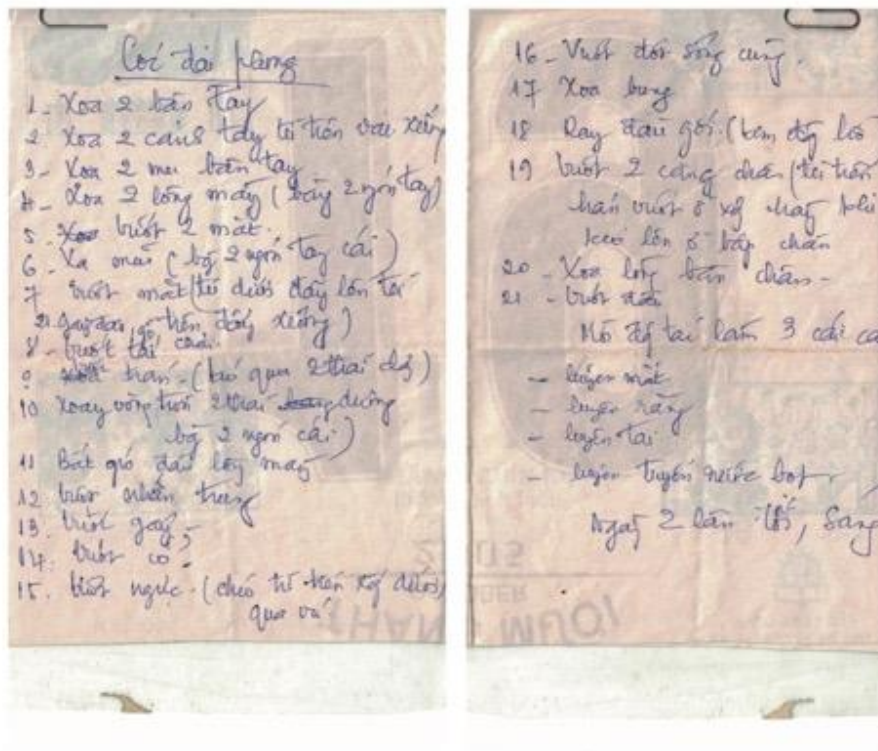


Figure 3 - Grandmother's Cốc Đại Phong Note1

35 Boxes showed a woman's facial routine, the source of inspiration was also taken from Cốc Đại Phong (Pham, 2018), the nightly routine of my grandmother.

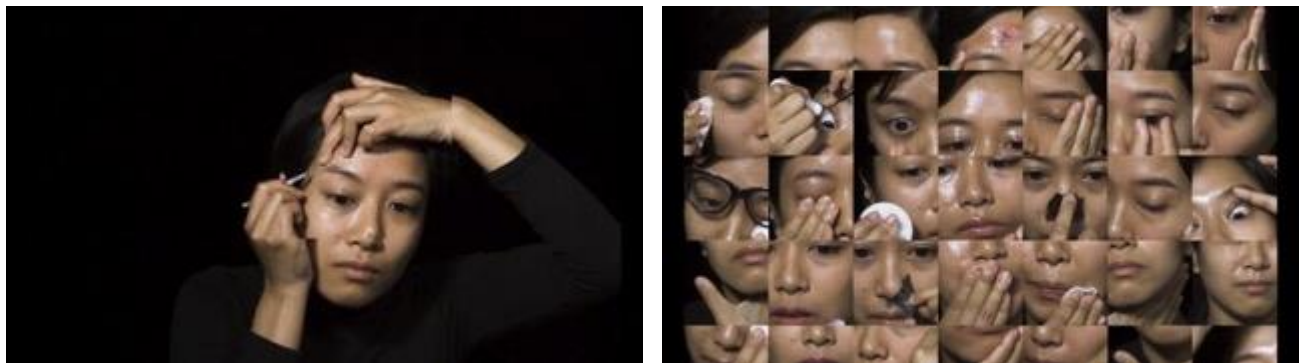
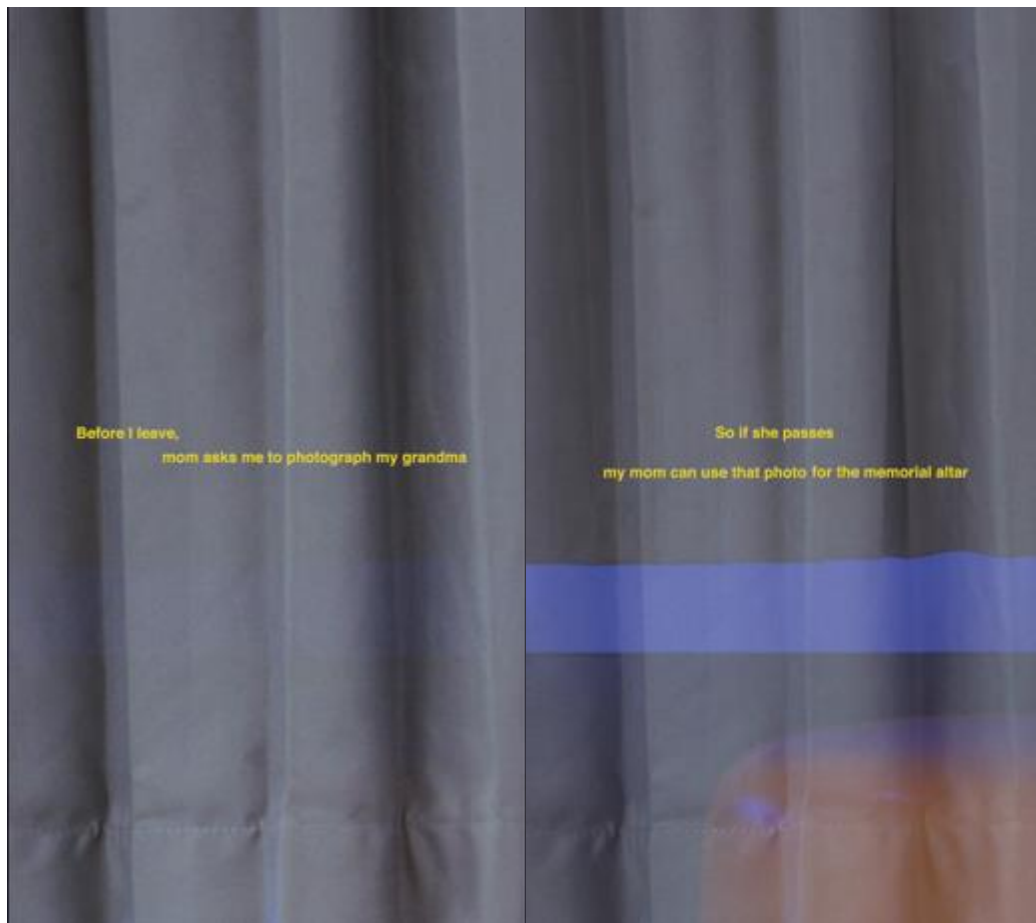


Figure 4 - Stills from 35 Boxes

<sup>1</sup> Here she noted the 21 steps to practise Cốc Đại Phong exercise, massaging parts of the body at night for sleep-aid and improving health. Hoà noted this on two old pieces of calendar paper.

In 2020, when I was at Piet Zwart, Covid-19 hit the Netherlands. Stuck in a foreign country and longing for home, I made a short film *From Home to Home* to convey the experience of being trapped in the uncanny and silent Netherlands. And talking about home made me think of my grandmother.



**Figure 5 - Stills from *From Home to Home***

While making this film, I realized that I still feared my grandmother's inevitable fading memories and death. I recognized that grandmother's portrait had been hidden after all this time. I had been telling stories about grandmother, and making visuals of her, passively - without consent, without conversation. Everyone had heard of her, but no one had ever seen her.

At the end, who is my grandmother? What has she been through that made her the person she is to me?

I wanted to know. Although she had rarely shown tenderness towards me, I still think about her constantly.

In September, when I was beginning to think about my final project and thesis, I received a call from my mom, saying that grandmother was suspected to have Alzheimer's disease. Hoping to reconcile and leave the past behind, to move forward, I contacted the embassy to be put on a waitlist to get on a rescued flight to go back home. This might be my last shot. To know who she is, and what she has been through.



**Figure 6 – Still from footage taken on my flight home in November 2020**

This time, as a filmmaker I wanted to make a step forward from my previous film. Rather than talk about her, I wanted to work with her to make her a protagonist in her own story, and I would inspect the topics upon which the film touched: home, post-war traumas on the female body, feminism, as well as inherited traumas. In the making of this film, I also formed a conversation between me – a young filmmaker and other filmmakers whose works gave me the inspiration and strength to finish this project.

As her granddaughter, I wanted to be with her till the very end.

## Chapter 01 – Finding the story

I was required to go through a 14-day mandatory quarantine as I landed in Ho Chi Minh City in November. Locked in a hotel in the heart of the city, alone, I spent most of my days watching TV and waiting for time to pass me by. Every night I watched the news on TV to update on the COVID-19 situation in Vietnam and around the world, the number of people infected and deceased. As I sat alone, watching TV, I couldn't stop thinking about my grandmother's "Television Story."

The story starts in the 70s, after the Fall of Saigon. Most families in Vietnam didn't have a television. Usually there was one television in each neighborhood, or each hamlet, and everyone would gather around watching television programs together. And there weren't many programs, mostly news, children's programs (Soviet cartoons), and "Looking for relatives" – a show for people to search for long lost relatives or loved ones lost in wartime.



**Figure 7 – The whole neighborhood in Vietnam gathers to watch TV**

Saigon Liberation Television broadcasted Vietnam's first-ever session at 19:00, May 1, 1975.

It was also the year when my grandfather – Phó, returned home to reunite with his family.

Not long after Phó was back, women started to look for him in the news, on television.



## Our Living Room War



**Figure 8 – A man and a woman watching a film footage of the Vietnam war on a television in their living room**

I found it funny that the America - Vietnam War was called “The Living Room War” (Arlen, 1997) because although television was the thing that brought peace to Vietnam, it brought war into my family<sup>2</sup>.

### **Conversation with my mom – Trang<sup>3</sup>**

**18 November 2020 – During quarantine**

Thy: The telly thing. Back in the days, when ladies went on telly to find grandfather, the neighborhood knew too, right? They must have known that other women were looking for grandfather?

Mom: Yes. They said: “goodness gracious there are loads of people looking for Mr. Tám, don’t you know?” On telly, I still remember that program every night: “I am Nguyễn Thị Gái or Nguyễn Thị Cẩm something, looking for Mr. Nguyễn Ngọc Phó... where are you now, please reconnect with your family.” Such message was broadcasted on telly for two years since 1975. To the point that it almost became an automated message. Night after night, women looked for your grandfather on television.”

Mom told me this story with her emotions removed like it's just another casual life story. I felt horrible. Everyone who knew my grandmother would know that my grandmother was cheated on. Some people would feel empathy for my grandmother, some would gossip about it excitedly. My grandmother’s pain was intensified by this kind of maliciousness.

When I was in mandatory quarantine, I learnt many things about grandmother through my mom in order to be prepared for making the film when I got out of quarantine: that grandmother and grandfather got married in their 20s and he left to go to the frontline not long after the wedding. Newly-wed Hoà,

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<sup>2</sup> The term Living Room War was coined because it was the first time that horrific images of war were projected into the American home night after night. Even though it was serving the US citizen, the graphic coverage showed not only images of American soldiers dying and killing, but also extreme violence of the American cause to a peasant society. Thus, the television news coverage in the US significantly influenced American public opinion, which was pre-eminent in determining the outcome of that American War in Vietnam. However, besides this triumphant victory, there is loss and trauma embedded in every war, and there was another Living Room War that took place in my family, in the very living room where my grandmother had spent most her youth raising children and waiting for her husband to return.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A

was left at home, all by herself. It reminded me of the film *Sandy Lives* (*Sandy Lives*, 1999); made in the late 90s by director Nguyễn Thanh Vân, based on a novel named “Ba người trên sân ga”, translated as *Three people at the train station* (2014) by Huu Phuong.



Figure 9 - Opening scene from *Sandy Lives* or *Đời Cát*

A man named Cảnh, returned home after 20 years of separation from his wife, Thoa, who has been waiting for him faithfully ever since. Upon the arrival of her husband, Thoa finds out that he has remarried and fathered a child (a girl, named Giang) with a woman named Tâm. The film poses a question: who would Cảnh choose to spend the rest of his life with? And what about the other?

### Hoà and Thoa

Thoa – the female protagonist of the film, is a 40-year-old childless woman separated from her husband for 20 years, thus preventing her from fulfilling the reproductive obligations imposed on women in Oriental society, as influenced by the teachings of Confucius.

As young girls my grandmother and mom were both taught disciplines of “Tam Tông – Tứ Đức” – the “Three-Obedience and Four Virtues.” These rules minimized women’s roles in society and reduced their presence and values to the household space. Three-obedience taught that women should obey: (1) their father as a maiden, (2) their husband as a married woman, (3) their sons as a mother/ widow (Marr, 1976).

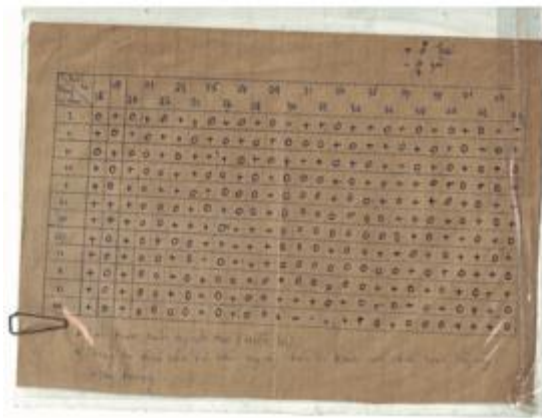
The four virtues were: (1) labour or “công,” (2) physical beauty or “dung,” (3) appropriate speech or “ngôn” and (4) proper behavior or “hạnh.” This meant that a “proper” woman ought to master household activities such as cooking, sewing, embroidery; being able to maintain physical appeal or beauty to only her husband, always self-demeaning, rigidly polite (assertiveness and imagination not welcomed). And she should always be honest and faithful of her (especially male) superiors (Marr, 1976).

In the film, the childless Thoa is considered a “failed woman” according to societal judgement. And to have her husband running towards another woman with whom he also had a child, makes her suffering unbearable.



**Figure 10 - Family photo of Phó, Hoà and the children**

My grandmother – Hoà, was much luckier than Thoa. In wartime, my grandfather came home twice and Hoà successfully bore two children: a girl – my mom, Trang, and a boy – my uncle. I found an ovulation calculating sheet of my grandmother – what she used to get pregnant.



**Figure 11 – The Ovulation Calculating Sheet of Hoà<sup>4</sup>**

But that was Hoà's only success. In *Sandy Lives* (Sandy Lives, 1999), Thoa found out that Cảnh was having an affair by receiving a letter from his daughter Giang, in real life, Hoà found out that her husband – Phó, was having an affair by watching television. As I watched television in my quarantine hotel room, I thought of her, of the moment when she was watching the news about her husband in a crowded room full of people who knew both her and my grandfather. I thought of how she had to go out every day and face the fact that her private life was being exposed on television every night. The more I thought, the more horrible it felt: how was her story different from our modern-day cyberbullying?

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<sup>4</sup> The first row being the age of the child-bearer (the mother), and the first column being the month in which the woman should have intercourse in order to bear a child, the "+" signifies the baby would be a male, and "o" signifies a female baby. This proves that my grandmother has to calculate a lot to get pregnant. When I showed my mother this sheet, my mother also confirmed that she used the same method to ensure that she would bear a male firstborn, as well as bearing both male and female children. In Vietnam, it is a blessing to have both male and female children, with a male first-born because the boy will ensure the continuation of a family. These kids will help their mother secure a good image, familial and social status.

While the news coverage helped stop the Vietnam War, what happened during wartime continued to haunt its survivors in their post-war life.

### *Trang and Giang*

In the film, Cánh's daughter Giang writes a letter to her father which leads to Thoa's discovery of Cánh's other "family." When Giang's mother Tâm finds out about the letter, she is furious with Giang and hits her. This doesn't stop Giang from sneaking out to visit her father. When I watched little Giang I saw my mother.



**Figure 12 – Photograph of Trang and Phó - my grandfather holding my mother**

Back then, when Trang found out that her father was having a mistress, every day after school she rode her bicycle to find Phó. She would follow grandfather for a while, then stopped. The next day she would resume the work from where she left it the day before. That was how my mother found out the place where her father was living with his mistress. Because Phó was riding a motorbike and Trang, a bicycle, so she had to plan carefully to catch it up.

When my mother, Trang, found out that her father was living with a mistress, every day after school she rode her bicycle to find Phó. She would follow him for a while, then stop. The next day she would resume the search from where she had left the day before. That was how my mother found out the place where her father was living with his mistress. Because Phó was riding a motorbike and Trang, a bicycle, she had to plan carefully to catch him up.

### **Conversation with my mom – Trang**

**09 November 2020**

Trang: I heard people said that grandfather was hanging out with this and that ladies out there, so I thought that he had a mistress, so I went after him to find out and hit the mistress.

Thy: oh, but by hitting the so called mistress, you didn't know for sure whether the lady was having an affair with grandfather, no?

Trang: At that time, I only knew that grandfather walked away from grandmother, riding motorbike with another woman on the back, not coming home and I thought he might have an affair with someone somewhere, so I went out and found the woman to beat her up. I didn't understand much. But now thinking back, I was in grade 11, grade 12 only, and didn't even know how to speak to grandfather. There was a time when grandfather got sick, he had to stay at Thống Nhất hospital, any woman that went around, I would hit them. I thought that they must be having an affair with grandfather. Now thinking back, I find it quite... funny.

Thy laughing\*

Trang came to each of my grandfather's mistresses, asked them to "return her dad to her." She even beat them up. This upset Phó, made my grandfather shy away from her, not keeping in touch for a very long time. At the same time, when Hoà found out, she scolded my mother too.

At first, I found it hard to relate to my mother's story. She was so aggressive. But when I saw Giang and Sandy Lives, I got it. Back then, being abandoned when one's father ran away with a mistress, was extremely shameful. It was a pain magnified by societal stigmas which scarred my mother for life.



Figure 13 - Giang got into a fight because her classmates said she doesn't have a father

Unlike Giang, Trang didn't know her father from her early years. Phó came back the first time when she was 6. That was when my grandmother conceived my uncle. When he left, Hoà told Trang to say goodbye to her father, which Trang found strange for it was the first time she met a man, and had to call him "father."



Figure 14 – Trang's "hate mail" to Phó

But just like Giang, Trang wrote a letter to her father too. However, rather than a sweet, loving letter, it was a “hate mail” that never got sent. Trang opened the letter distantly “My utterly respected father” or “Kính gửi! Ba.” I could see that my mom loved grandfather, but the series of events happened during her childhood ruined their relationship. When Phó left my grandmother, he left Trang too. They were not in touch until recent years. Until this day, my mother still says that if she had behaved better, she wouldn’t have lost her father to another woman.

I don’t think it’s her fault. How can she be responsible for all of these things?

But then who should we blame?

Was it Phó’s fault?



## *Phó and Cảnh*

Back in the old days, after coming home from the frontline, my grandfather worked as a procurator. He looked good and travelled frequently for work, that allowed Phó to meet other women and many of them were attracted to him. Unlike Cảnh, my grandfather wasn't entirely absent in wartime. He came home twice, got my grandmother pregnant twice and at that time he was quite in love with Hoà.



**Figure 15 – Photograph of Phó and Hoà holding Trang - my mother**

Phó didn't cheat on Hoà in wartime, through the postcards I read in my family archive, there was tender affection from him to my grandmother. Although his returning marked the separation of my family, was it entirely his fault?



**Figure 16 - Postcard Phó sent Hoà when he was in the Soviet Union, written "to my beloved Hoà" or "tặng Hoà của anh"**



**Figure 17 - Postcard Phó sent Hoà when she was pregnant, wishing her to deliver a pretty baby**



**Figure 18 – Photograph of Phó, my grandfather in his uniform**

My grandfather's absence from his children's childhood, as well as in his marriage with my grandmother made it impossible for a healthy relationship when he got home. His children didn't recognise him. He lost many treasure moments with them, by fighting in the war. His wife – Hoà, was jealous too, for he was attractive. It made Hoà insecure and questioned his faithfulness.

It was ironic for Phó.

He went home, then got pushed away from home by all these remnants of the war – which had ended long ago.



## Chapter 02 – Learning Akerman

Spending 14 days locked up in a hotel room and chatting with my mom about our family history made me excited for coming home and being reunited with your mother and grandmother? Mom told me that my grandmother was happier now thanks to her fading memories. I imagined Hoà in her 80s being joyful and curious; as if she was rejuvenated. According to Mom, Hoà now asked to go out every day, to get closer to nature and she would start conversations with people she meets. How ironic it is that in the last days of life, Hoà lives more joyously than ever.

When I got out of quarantine, I went back to our country home to spend time with grandmother. After all, I had come back to make a film about her.

For so long, I had been thinking of making a movie about Hoà without knowing how. But then I watched Chantal Akerman's film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles, 1975). I had never seen the images of women doing chores, cooking, looking after children being filmed so meticulously the way Akerman did.

In all the films I had watched before, the scenes of women doing household chores usually didn't take up much screen time. Sweeping the house, doing laundry, and other chores have always been cut short; in a way, housework looks much more pleasant on screen. It makes audiences like myself being able to enjoy the scenes although in the back of my head I do know very well that household chores are, in fact, boring.

What Akerman did was show the world as it is without using scene cutting techniques. In this film, she did exactly the opposite, using still shot and showing the entire process of Jeanne making meatballs or taking a bath. It reminded me of the time when I was at home with my grandmother.

I was with her from when I was born, 'till 17 - leaving home to study abroad. All my memories of her were wrapped in the dimensions of our kitchen or grandmother's bedroom. Like Jeanne Dielman, she would wake up, do grocery shopping, and cook. My mother worked. My grandmother took care of my brother and me. In the summer, I stayed home, spending all day in the kitchen with my grandmother. I would watch telly or do homework, doodled while she did all the chores. Long after, even when we had hired a house-keeper, she hardly took me out. Often, she would stay around and observe whether the house-keeper did things the way she preferred. She sometimes cooked herself to make sure the dishes are delicious the way she wanted them to be.

It wasn't until I grew up and got exposed to Westernized ideology on gender, that I understood the socio-historical context of the primary ideologies that were popular in Vietnam when my grandmother (and my mother also) was growing up.

The two World Wars shifted gender roles of all countries involved and affected by it. As men left the house to go to the frontline - battlefields, women took on the role of homemakers: they worked in factories, they raised children, they took care of elders, and they also became a strong force of labor for national economies. The men became soldiers and heroes at wars, but women at that time almost took up the position of a man in the family and in society. (Healy, 2006)

For this, it is sensible to say the practice of gender division of labor and power did shift in post-war societies. The case of Vietnam is determined by its dominant ideologies: Confucianism and Communism before 1986 - the time of my grandmother, and a paradigm shift towards a market-oriented ideology marked by the time of Doi-moi, starting in 1986 - the time of my mother. (Healy, 2006)

While the suffering of soldiers was acknowledged in the country's imaginative representation of the war, the private pain of women caused by the war was rarely acknowledged in Vietnam society - a

gender-biased society. Thus, my grandmother experienced a type of non-combat trauma that was linked with loss - of family, of men and home, of health and beauty.

## Hoà and Jeanne

Grandmother was hard to please. I don't recall her whining about the daily routine. However, as a child, I saw her routine as sad and boring and had always wondered if she felt that way. I saw her when I looked at Jeanne Dielman, as the film depicted a colorless life of a housewife for three consecutive days.

The patterns of Jeanne Dielman's life were determined by the social-economic structures of her society. Thus, The full title of the film immediately tells me that Jeanne Dielman is defined and circumscribed by the space she occupies. As time went by, Jeanne was pushed to her limits. The end of the film shows Jeanne's last straw - she killed her client (she does sex-work for extra income,) and sat alone silently in the dining room.

And I see Hoà. I see Hoà's life, also defined and circumscribed by the space she occupies. A silent life. Trapped in a homestead. Stuck in a kitchen. But Hoà isn't Jeanne. Her husband didn't die, he left her. She didn't have her last straw. The only thing that broke her out of her routine is old-age, hindering her from doing all of that housework. It is more than a corrective to traditional cinema, Jeanne Dielman is a lesson in a structural economy: the full visibility given to daily tasks (Martin and Akerman, 1979).

I will list and analyze a few scenes/stills that are meaningful for me and how I would like to adopt them into my own film.



**Figure 19 - Jeanne and Her Dressing Table**

On Jeanne's dressing table is a B&W photo of her and her late husband. The photo represents her life before, her past, her nostalgia, a past so different from the present.



**Figure 20 - Hoà's dressing table**

And this is the shelf of personal items of my grandmother, with a B&W photo of her in the past, and four different clocks. The photo and the clocks represent two opposite lives, one is Hoà in her younger years and the other, Hoà now.



**Figure 21 - Hoà and her wedding ring**

Instead of a B&W photo taken with a husband like Jeanne, my grandmother has her wedding ring with her still. It squeezes her finger like the way her past embraces and suffocates her.



**Figure 22 - Jeanne in the Kitchen**

The kitchen is where most of Jeanne's life takes place. The static, non-cutting camera works like an examining detective standing back just so as to contemplate the actions of Jeanne. Moreover, the long take records 'real-time' works effectively in inscribing the tedious banality of everyday actions.



**Figure 23 - Hoà in the kitchen**

I did what Akerman did, documenting the images of my grandmother who won't stop doing housework, even at her age. Cleaning and cooking are tasks that imprinted deeply in her subconscious.



**Figure 24 - Jeanne in the Bath Tub**

When Jeanne bathes before dinner, I didn't see merely a few erotic glimpses of flesh in the water; rather, I witnessed the entire functional process as she actually scrubs every part of her body and then cleans out the tub. The graphic details destroy the eroticism and make us aware of just how unrealistic and contrived most other bath scenes really are (Martin and Akerman, 1979). This use of real-time forces me to see how many steps are involved in each simple task.



**Figure 25 - Jeanne Sitting in The Living Room**

Akerman ends her films with an even longer take, more than 3 minutes, where Delphine Seyrig sitting silently in her living room after committing a murder. The final long take has the duration of a last extended thought, making me confused. I could not tell whether the protagonist felt relief or stuck. It was a long, silent pause that haunts me still.

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## Thy and Akerman

While Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels (Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels, 1975) inspired me to embark on this journey of making a film about my grandmother, Akerman's No Home Movie showed me the skills that I can apply to film to build my own story.

For Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels (Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels, 1975) is a feature film, with film crew and actors to rebuild a storyline based on a true story. In my case, I have my mother and grandmother as living and breathing protagonists. My intention in making this film is to record the last moments in the life of my grandmother, of her relationship with my mother and me. Akerman does the same thing in No Home Movie (No Home Movie, 2015).

I base on the plot-summary of No Home Movie (No Home Movie, 2015) and re-write one for my film:

*Thy films her grandmother, who is reaching the end of life in her country house in Cu Chi, Sai Gon. The director goes back and forth between the city house and the country house to visit her grandmother. Thy mines her mother's fading memories to construct a family history being lost to the inexorable march of time. The film portrays her relationship with two generations of women in her family, her mother and her grandmother, and their inherited traumas.*

I watched the film and noted down every single scene, its order. For this particular documentary, Akerman filmed and wrote a diary simultaneously, she filmed without a script and all of her footage was brought to post-production and edited right after (Margulies, 2016). Apart from the selected scenes which I will talk about shortly, I also listed 46 scenes and studied them to understand Akerman's and her way of telling stories.



- Chapter 02 - Outline (Look for material)
1. First scenes: - long take in Israel - More than 4.  
- distorted noise - wind - cheap camera  
- Desert, dust, blurry - sound of sand.
  2. Outdoor - Garden - looking from home - bird chipping  
3. - contrast with previous scene
  4. Nelly enters living room - interact with camera.
  5. Looking out from window.
  6. Eating in kitchen - Camera placed outside.
  7. Bedroom - pan to see living room - introducing structure of the house.
  8. Entering the room - black camera, light changes, arranging shifts
  9. Eating with Chantal - Chantal hidden by Nelly's conversation | her mother - from door frame.
  10. Looking out - down to the street - elders walking by - ppl. waiting for bus, cars.
  11. Another doorway angle - there is distance, a door in between - Chantal in it - Nelly's movement - change the camera sight balance.
  12. Long shot - hearing Nelly's sound - walking around (background is not clear)
  13. Sitting in living room reading - contrast light/dark - Newspaper - From sound from outside.
  14. Skipped - Mac screen - introducing new character - zoom in/out - showing Chantal's room in NRG.  
- talk very loud so Nelly can hear. Oklahoma.  
- asking when will I see you again - Clark.
  15. Kitchen - placing camera on furniture - empty room - hearing the sound - wait and see moment.  
From walking sound - guessing who - not showing hearing her walking around. Nelly.
  16. Handheld - looking out to the sky - tilt down, garden - blue bench - bird chipping.  
Ambulance show sound.
  17. Talking in kitchen - to Chantal's sister - Chantal talks to Nelly.
  18. Sitting kitchen - conversation of Nelly's memory of her father - She remember clearly every details - joy in her face - talk about Daddy.  
Talking about how beautiful Nelly was.  
Now her eyes colour got lighter, like her silver hair, aging.
  19. Empty sit in the opposite, not showing Chantal's face. low camera angle.
  20. Camera moves from kitchen to living room - light temperature changes from room to room - Vacuum sound - turn back to Chantal's messy room - Showing Nelly in Chantal's room. Angry - loud sound of vacuum.
  21. CA walks to the window - stop - not open the curtain
  22. Kitchen scene - CA enters the room - we see her face for the first time - sitting down - facing her back to the camera. Nelly's face in the middle of screen.  
- Asking why Nelly eating so little.  
- Talking about grandmother - how strong she was during the war.  
- Talk about 1939 - Moving to Belgium
  23. 35 - 45 : More than 10 mins.
  24. Living Room - camera placed in doorway. (Empty) - only hearing sound. - No one
  25. Skipped call - working table, in NYC.  
- handheld - shot duration = length of conversation. Talking about Clara filming her.  
Conversation about what CA do daily.  
Messy table - Move camera closer / cut. Cut 3 times - tried to say glaze before but the conversation goes on.  
Say glaze for 4 - 5 times.
  26. 56:05 - 1:03 - 7 mins.  
Desert scene after a 'good mood' talk.  
Mid-movie.
  27. Film the nature - her shadow on it.  
Exterior shot.
  28. Camera place outside of the door - hear room, daughter conversation
  29. Hallway - Nelly wearing bathrobe, CA walks into Nelly's room.
  30. Hallway looking into Living Room - Nelly passed by, camera lighting change.
  31. Camera filming the street looking from the inside - curtain - crossroad - pan camera left - breathing sound.  
- turn camera back inside - colour temperature change due to yellow light, walk into kitchen, see Nelly's wearing bathrobe - go to kitchen - then kitchen balcony, pointing camera down to backyard - wet floor - raining - gloomy day.
  32. Purring - in Nelly's room - filming window - curtain moves slightly - wind sound.
  33. Back to living room scene - eating with Clara.  
- light changing by the window.  
- Talking with Clara about CA.
  34. Hallway - Nelly & Clara getting ready to go out for a walk - Doors closed.
  35. Night - CA goes out to the balcony, hear her breathing - raining - dark, blurry at times - walk back, water running, she's about to take a bath.  
36. (Nelly)
  37. Camera place outside of the door - hear room, daughter conversation
  38. Hallway - Nelly wearing bathrobe, CA walks into Nelly's room.
  39. Hallway looking into Living Room - Nelly passed by, camera lighting change.
  40. Camera filming the street looking from the inside - curtain - crossroad - pan camera left - breathing sound.  
- turn camera back inside - colour temperature change due to yellow light, walk into kitchen, see Nelly's wearing bathrobe - go to kitchen - then kitchen balcony, pointing camera down to backyard - wet floor - raining - gloomy day.
  41. Purring - in Nelly's room - filming window - curtain moves slightly - wind sound.

Figure 26 - Thy's Study Note of No Home Movie



**Figure 27 - Nelly having lunch with Akerman**

In *No Home Movie* (*No Home Movie*, 2015), chats between Akerman and her mother Nelly over meals often lead to family stories, including their respective childhood memories, to the wartime atrocities that Akerman's parents physically survived but from which they never truly recovered. It is at the kitchen table that they talk about family anecdotes.



**Figure 28 - Hoà having lunch with her helper**

Similarly, meals are when my grandmother is most talkative. Since she has memory lapses, in the course of having meals she would spontaneously tell stories to me. Stories of the past. I follow what Akerman did, setting the camera still, in the time of us having meals. Since I cannot know when she would tell what stories, setting up the camera helps me focus on talking to my grandmother without having to think too much, making the story-telling flow naturally.



**Figure 29 – Frist scene of No Home Movie**

In No Home Movie, the first image is a four-minute sustained shot of a tree in an Israeli landscape buffeted by extremely high winds. The tree resembling her rooted mother - the figure who always reminded her of her restlessness - but also life itself (Koehler, 2016).

Its duration raises the hypothesis of solitude.

Thus, throughout the movie, Akerman returns at various intervals to these hauntingly vacant landscape shots, which, save for a couple of brief moments, account for the only images of outdoor locations not obstructed by windows or curtains, thus accentuating the divide between the domestic and the geographic even as they work to collapse a sense of past and present historical trauma (Koehler, 2016).



**Figure 30 – My family's country home**

This is our countryside house where my grandmother is staying. She hardly leaves home, except when my mother picks her up to go to our city house. It has been so long since the last time grandmother was out of the house, going to the centre of the city. I'm the total opposite. My life happens on the streets and each time I come to visit her, I feel as if I am stepping into a whole different world. Our two worlds are apart, parallel, but to her, my world doesn't exist. And that is also how I feel when leaving her, to go back to the city. By adapting Akerman's use of landscape scences, in my film, I intend to shoot a long-take shot, depicting the busy roads of Saigon in the morning where people rush out to start a new

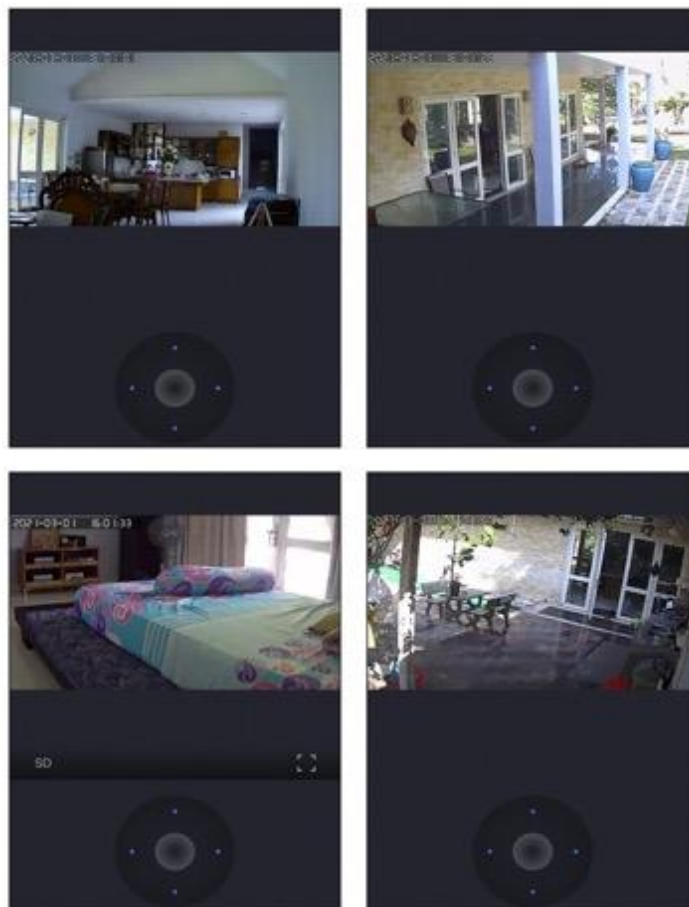


day follows by another long take depicting the road leading to the country house where my grandmother is living, portraying the split between her life and mine, one of a contemporary, urbanist and one of someone whose life is in the past and in nature.



**Figure 31 - Nelly on Skype**

Akerman collapses the geographic and temporal distance between locations in *No Home Movie*, which is largely set indoors but shifts between Akerman's final visits to her mother's home and the various travelling through the United States, a situation forcing mother and daughter to rely upon modern technology in order to communicate.



**Figure 32 - CCTV of my country home**

While in *No Home Movie* (*No Home Movie*, 2015), modern technology helps Akerman talking to her mother even though they are thousands of miles apart, in my case, it's a passive communication process where my mother sets up CCTV all over the house for security and for surveillance purposes, surveilling my grandmother remotely. Since I am living with my mother in the city, I see her watching my grandmother through CCTV, silently. She cares a lot but chooses not to say anything. Just watching, in silence. Like the way I discreetly place the camera whenever I film my grandmother. I came to a shocking realization; this is the way the women in my house relate and communicate with each other. While Akerman and her mother interact openly face-to-face, my family - we don't do it directly, we care, but we care from afar.

## Chapter 03 – The making of GRAND-MOTHER-I

As I tell the stories of my family life, its meaning transforms. Unlike films where there's an end, the life-story of my family keeps on flowing and the story's meaning evolves as time goes by. It's an obstacle I face when brainstorming, thinking about my film.

Just as I thought my mother would be bitter about my grandfather for the rest of her life, and would always watch my grandmother from afar; in February this year, my grandfather suddenly passed away. I was in the course of building the script and planning for paying him a visit. But I didn't make it. When he died, I saw my mother break down in tears. She had her love hidden and repressed until the last beat of her father's heart.



**Figure 33 - Trang with her father in the hospital**

I didn't see my mother, I saw Trang – Phó's little girl.

A month before his passing, my grandfather called my mom and said he owed her an apology for not fulfilling the duty of a father. So as I thought my mother would hate my grandfather forever, it turned out to be completely different. Maybe she loves him too much, and it's hard to tell love from hatred sometimes.

When I first thought of how to make the film, and tell the stories of mom and grandmother, I was filming from a distance, not pointing the camera directly at them and planned to have a voice-over of myself narrating their story using a script formed from my recorded interviews with mom. However, it wasn't enough. I found out that even though I was telling the stories of Hoà and Trang, it was from my subjective point of view. It will never be the complete truth. Because I was speaking for them.

I don't want to speak for my mother, my grandmother or my grandfather. In fact, I want to avoid speaking for anyone but myself. And as I have discovered the protagonist of the film: Trang – my mother. She is the one who has always been there, listening, telling me stories and looking at everything. This reminds me of Trinh T. Minh-ha's film *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (Surname Viet, Given Name Nam, 1989). In her movie, most viewers would assume that the Vietnamese women in the first part of the film have been interviewed and filmed in Vietnam. As the film advances, however, the interviews are made to look less and less "natural" – to a more stylized and dramatic, until about halfway through, the staged quality of the interviews starting to be revealed.

This method of Trinh T.Minh-ha raises a controversial question, at the heart of identity politics:

"Who can speak for whom, or, said differently, who represents whom, and for what reasons? Trinh argues that "speaking for" the Other is tantamount to an epistemological act of colonization that in paternalistically claiming to "give voice," actually silences the Other by regulating what the Other is allowed to mouth." (Gracki, 2001, p.56)

Trinh T.Minh-ha lets actors reenact the content of the interviews done by Mai Thu Van in Vietnam: *un peuple, des voix* (1983, cited in Gracki, 2001, p.49), as if they are the 'real' interviewee. The actors are Vietnamese women who have migrated to America, and they now play the role of Vietnamese women who stayed in Vietnam – the women that they used to be, as a way to look at themselves in the past. The use of archival footage and folk songs form a richly-layered and utterly complex mosaic of stories of Vietnamese women, re-represented by American-Vietnamese women. I like how American-Vietnamese women resembled their Vietnamese peers in Vietnam; similar yet different. Taking up from Trinh T. Minh-ha, I chose to use a mix of social-historical narratives and personal narratives by using both footages from nation archives and my family archives – showing how historical context and personal history coexist and weave together.

One thing I do different from Trinh T. Minh-ha is that I don't use actresses and actors to reenact the characters in my film, I let my mother to look back at her 17 years-old version and see how things have changed for her.

There are an infinite number of ways to tell a story, and many different truths to be heard. Therefore, the identity of everyone in this family story is conceived of as multiple layers, the uncovering of which never leads to "the true self" or to an "original self." Unveiling the self only leads to other layers and other-selves." (Gracki, 2001)

As my aim is not to be fully objective but to minimize my interference into the narrative of mother (the narrative of my grandmother is traced through others,) yet somehow still being able to participate in it, I filmed my mother looking back at who she was, with my appearance as someone who asked questions. My role is the one to initiate my mother's reflections of the past, to help her reconcile.

## The Three-part Film

The process of making the film and writing this thesis helped me organize and plan how I want to make the film. Taking inspirations from the discussed works in the previous chapters, I decided to make a three-part film. The first and second mainly deal with the exploration of my family history, specifically the historical and personal context of first my grandmother and then my mother's life; the third part - which I will focus on in this chapter - marks the discovery of my mother as the true protagonist of the film for she was the one who sees it all.

First I will give an overview of the 3 part structure.

### The First Part – A Journey to the Past

This depicts my journey of going through the lives of my mother and grandmother in the past, which has helped me to understand the history of my country as well as the traumas inflicted by wars.

In this part, Hoà's story would be told through conversations between my mom and I.

### The Second Part – The Reconciliation

The second part of the film will depict the time I spend with Hoà and will reflect on Hoà's current state of mind.

In this part, I will include a letter that grandmother wrote for me when I was 17<sup>5</sup> that I haven't read until now, was discovered while doing research for the film; it makes me wonder if I got the letter much earlier, would things be different? Would I understand her better?

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix B

## The Third Part – Trang, the protagonist

At the beginning of the third part, I will use images of my mom's CCTV monitoring of my grandmother, with my mom's voice talking about her guilty feelings of living away from Hoà, I would switch the focus from my grandmother to my mother for this reason: she is the character in the film which needs to reconcile with her past, with Hoà and Phó (her parents).

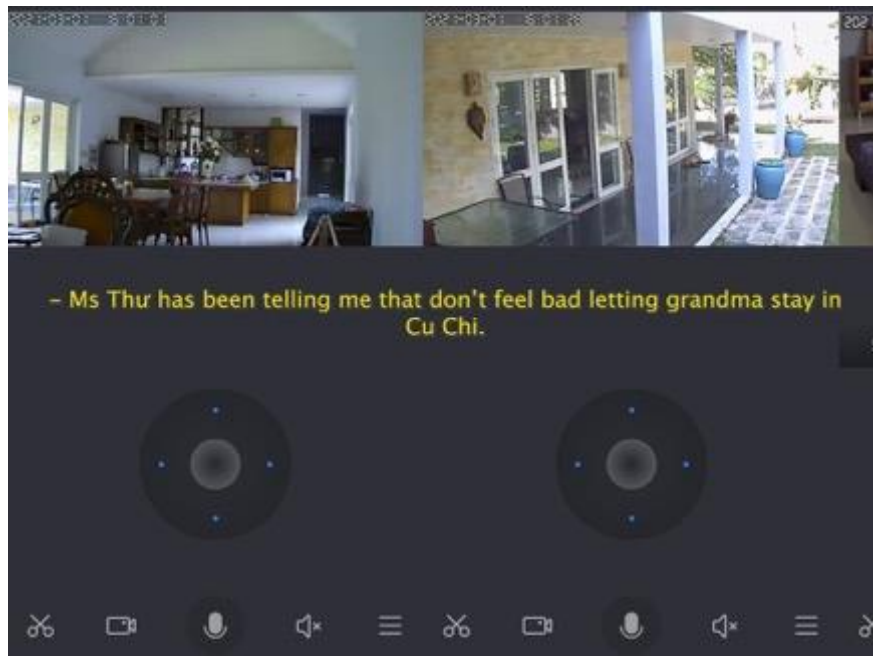


Figure 34 - Still from Thy's "CCTV" sequence

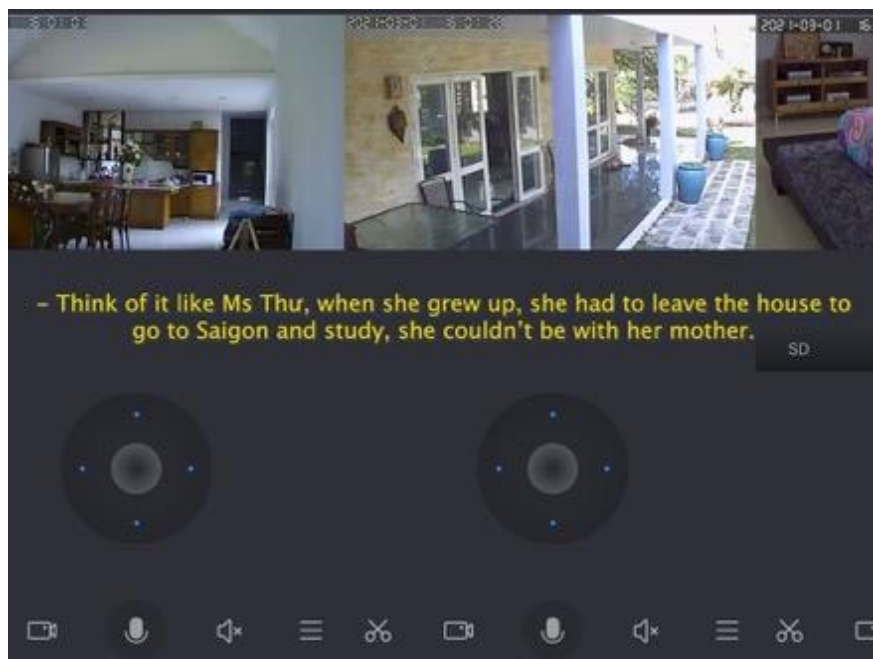


Figure 35 - Still from Thy's "CCTV" sequence

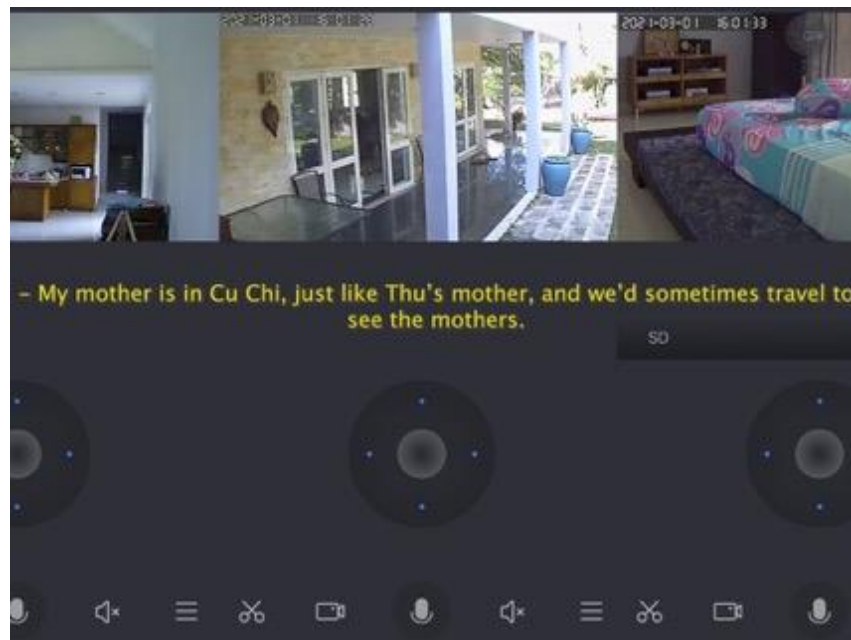


Figure 36 - Still from Thy's "CCTV" sequence

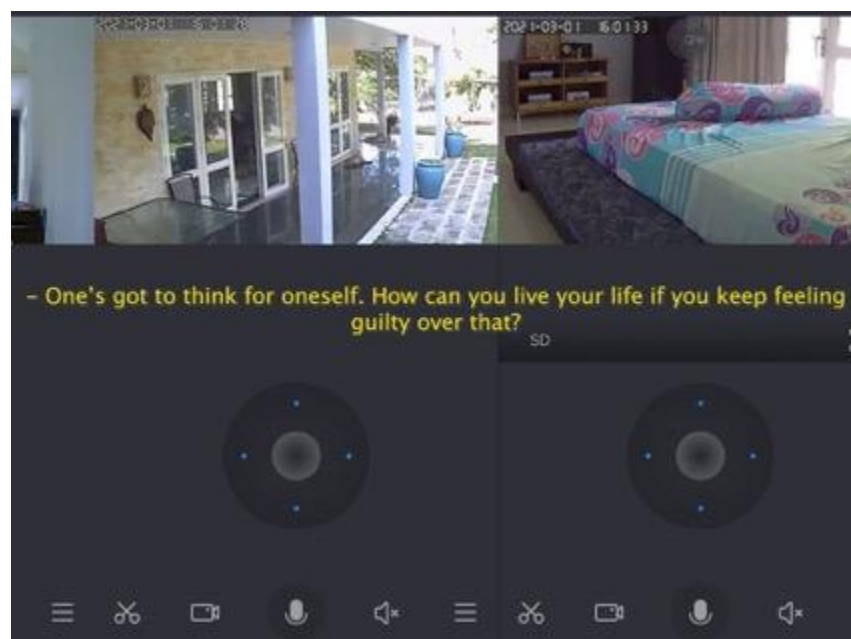


Figure 37 - Still from Thy's "CCTV" sequence

Because this part focuses on the relationship between Trang, Hoà and Phó – her own family, I step back and let her play Trang as a child, like the way Trinh T.Minh-ha used Vietnamese-American women who reenacted the responses of Mai Thu Van's interviewees - Vietnamese women who stays in Vietnam, as a way of looking back at the person those Vietnamese-American women used to be.



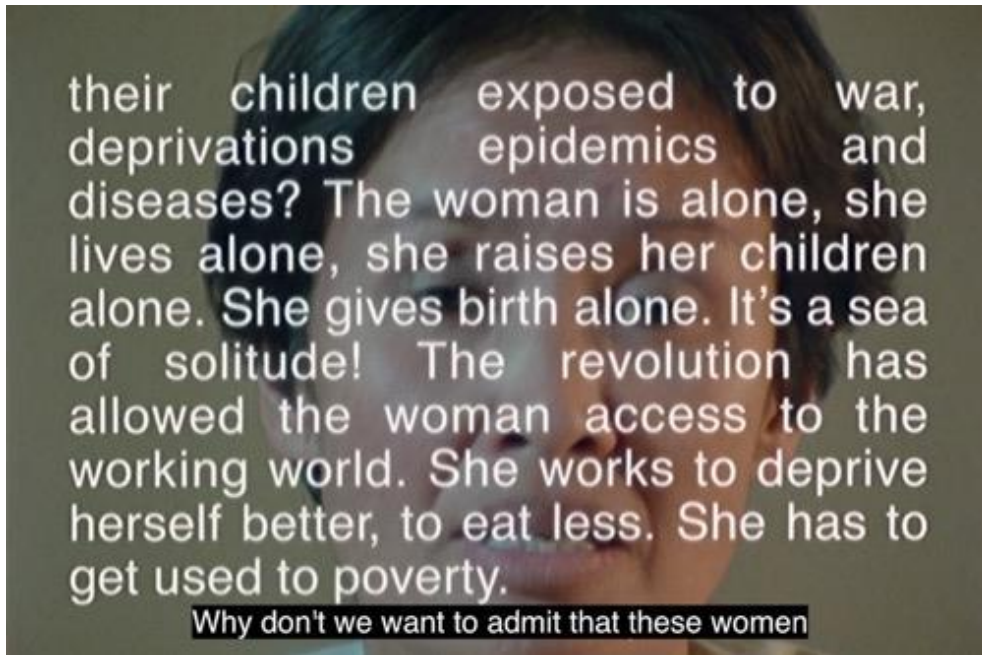


Figure 38 - Still from Surname Viet, Given Name Nam

Learning from Trinh T. Minh-ha, I would let mom look back at who she used to be, the 17-year-old Trang, by letting her read the “hate mail” which she wrote to her father and which I mentioned in chapter 1. Visually, I would juxtapose the images of Trang in the past and in the present, alongside Trang’s reading voice.

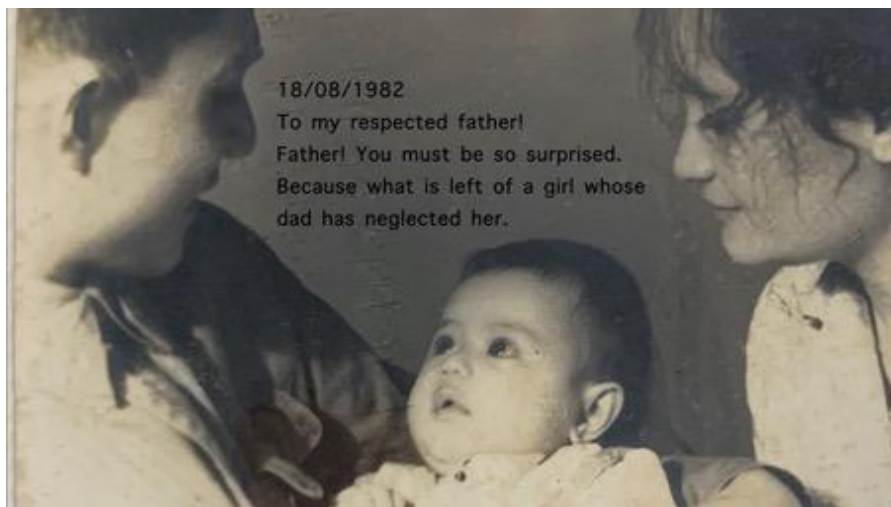


Figure 39 - Still from Thy's “hate mail” sequence



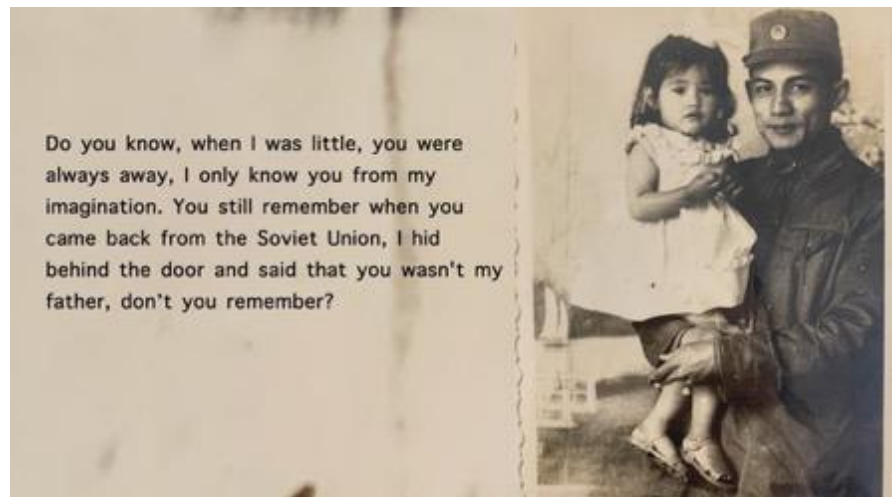


Figure 40 - Still from Thy's "hate mail" sequence

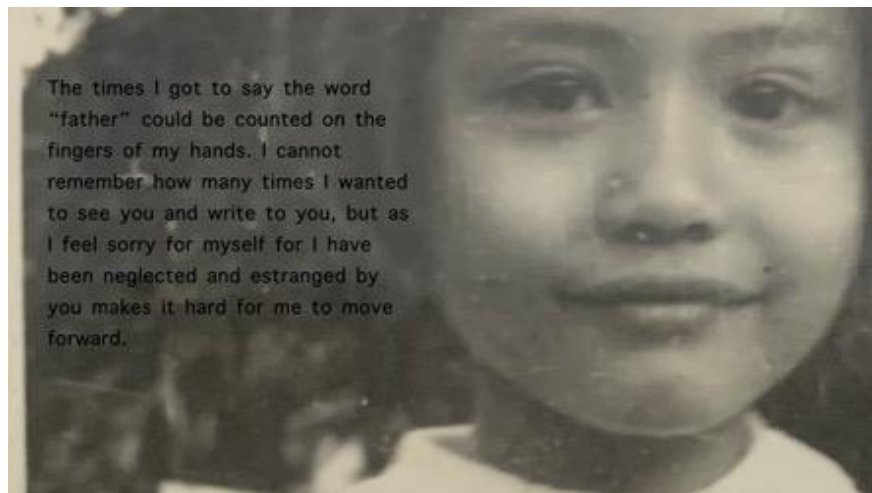


Figure 41 - Still from Thy's "hate mail" sequence

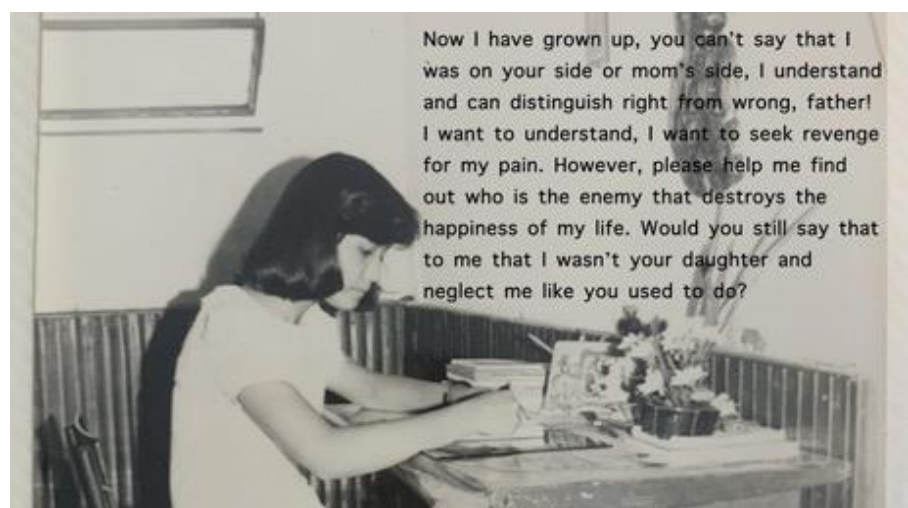


Figure 42 - Still from Thy's "hate mail" sequence

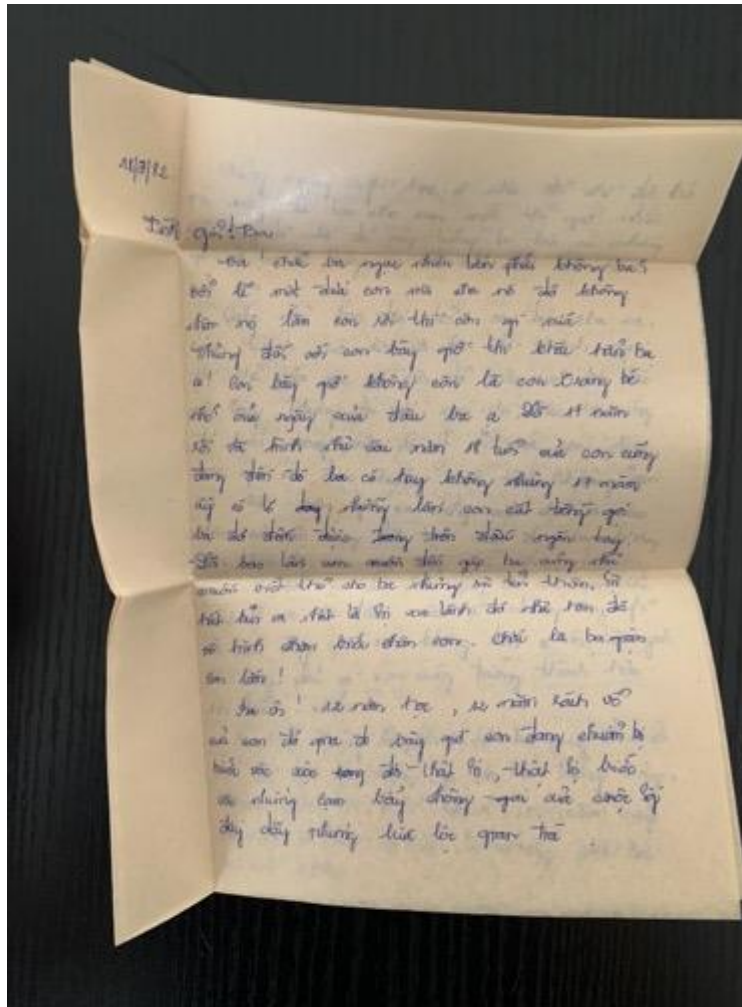


Figure 43 - Trang's "hate mail" to Phô



Figure 44 - My mother, in her 50s, reading the letter she wrote when she was 17

Towards the end of the letter, I show my mother now in her 50s, re-reading the letter she wrote almost 40 years ago.

I will also include my voice asking her questions:

**Conversation with my mother – Trang, after she read the “hate mail”<sup>6</sup>**

Thy: Why didn't you send this letter?

Mom: I was so sad. I wanted to write it all down. But I didn't send it. I don't really remember what I was feeling at that moment.

Thy: Do you think it would have turned out differently if you sent the letter?

Trang: Maybe.

Women in my family have the tendency to write to each other but never send the letters. My grandmother wrote to me, my mother wrote to my grandmother. Like I mentioned above, part of me hopes that I got to read my grandmother's letter earlier, and this reconciliation between my grandmother and I could have happened earlier. My mother wasn't as lucky, she wrote this letter and she forgot about it, until I came back and found it. My grandfather had passed away... I wonder if she was wishing the same thing as I did – wishing to have received grandmother's letter much earlier, does she wish to have sent her letter to grandfather?

Trang: I'm no longer mad. I am sad, for things have passed, but no longer angry. When you're no longer angry, when you've cleared everything, there's no longer any chance to reconcile. When I get it all, I cannot be with my parents to have a happy family life, no more. I regret that I didn't have the chance to be close to my parents. With grandfather, just the recent years. With my grandmother, she was distant to me, and she didn't talk much to anyone. Until now, when she started to be more open to others, her memories mostly faded away. I don't have many memories with my parents. I float alone, living on my own.

Thy: But now you still have grandmother here, to take care of?

Yes, but I take care of grandmother like taking care of a baby. I talk to her, but she doesn't talk to me back. Well, I'm settled with it now, I took care of grandfather till he was 86. Life is never peaceful so now I feel alright.

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix A



**Figure 45 - Still from Thy's "hate mail" sequence**

Still from the interview. I focus on her glasses, the image of her visage through the fogged glasses is a metaphor of my mother looking at her past through the lens of someone who has been through a lot. The now-Trang looking at the then - Trang, 39 years ago.

Trang: I didn't know that I still had the letter. I was afraid that grandmother would know so I sent it to my best friend's address.

Thy: Why were you afraid?

Trang: Because she was mad at grandfather, yet I tried to contact him, I was afraid that she would be upset.



**Figure 46 - Still from Thy's "hate mail" sequence**

As the conversation reaches the end, mom suddenly tells me something that would make the ending of my film.

Trang: And I have one more regret was that when I was younger I didn't hangout enough. Because I was afraid of making grandmother upset so I felt as if I was obliged to take care of grandmother her whole life, putting my personal life and needs second to that. Now as I recall everything, I would have hanged out more, with your dad, on Christmas Eves, go dating on Valentine's day. I would have lived more of my younger years.

Thy: It's not too late now, mom.

Trang: Yes, that's why on our 30th anniversary, your dad and I left the house and went to Dalat for a concert. I'm still hot enough to be your father's lover, aren't I?

\*both laughing\*



**Figure 47 - Mom smiling at the end of our conversation - Still from Thy's 'hate mail' sequence**

Like in Surname Viet, I make this interview with the hope to reveal the fundamental “impossibility of one single truth” in any act of “witnessing, remembering, re-reading” and, I would add, of representing (Framer, Framed 83 cited in Gracki, 2001).



## Conclusion

As I came back home and got to know more about my grandmother's health condition, her now being happy as my mother described, was only half of the truth. She is much happier than before, but at times, she is also very sad. Grandmother tries to tell me why, but she stutters and all her memories keep getting mixed up.

Looking back at my conversations with Hoà, mostly I couldn't make sense of what my grandmother was saying. I had to ask my mom what happened during my time away in order to decode what my grandmother was trying to tell. Hardly did I realize, until mom told me, that my grandmother wasn't speaking to me.

She was speaking to her other granddaughter – the child of my uncle.

When I was with her, she spoke to me, addressed me with different pronouns, and none of them related to me. If I was the person I was years ago, I would be saddened by that; I would sulk that why did she forget me, and that she didn't love me. But now, I know her story, I feel that I even love her more.



Figure 48 - Hoà hanging out with Thy



**Figure 49 - Trang brings Hoà to visit relatives in Nha Trang (Hoà's hometown)**

*Hoà doesn't walk as she used to. Every late afternoon, Thy will take her out in her wheelchair to look at the city, making up for the time she has to spend indoors. Thy makes up for the time Hoà didn't take her out as a child, now she is the one taking Hoà out.*

In this stage of the project, I look at the objectives which I set at the beginning of it all; I can see my objectives have been fulfilled: I now understand my grandmother better – knowing her, and understanding my family history, what my grandmother and my mother has been through; I have reconciled with my grandmother and I have helped my mother to reconcile with her past. Now that I have time to spend with grandmother, taking care of her without feeling it as emotional baggage. And so does Trang, my mother.

We are now moving forward.

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## APPENDIX A: Translated transcription of conversations

*The conversations below have been translated from Vietnamese into English by Thy.*

### **Conversation with my mom – Trang 18 November 2020 – During quarantine**

Mom: You doing anything today?

Thy: Anything exciting lately mum?

Mom: I told you my day before and you said my life is so boring.

Thy: Nooooo, tell meee

Mom: Well, that's all. I didn't go out today, just sat there and worked on the bird nest thing until your dad came home, ate and went back to the room. End.

Mom: Why didn't you call me?

Thy: Oh, I was worried that you're busy. I spent the whole day on the bird nest thing. Gotta finish 400 grams for this weekend.

Mom: That's my day. working on this and that then go to bed and wishing for a good night sleep. Calculating in the mind. This morning I only had a few patients at the clinic, no operations. It's sad not having an operation to work on. No money coming in means sadness \*laugh\* Money coming is happiness. But yeah, if I don't save, when you kids come for it, I won't have to give. Your dad, he's out from dawn till dusk and now he's sitting at the computer. I ate bánh canh (rice noodle) this evening. I finished cooking it and it's ready to eat when your dad's home. It's 9, and I haven't taken a shower. I'll take one soon.

Thy: Oh, but what were you about to ask me, I forgot?

Thy: Ah I wanted to ask about the ladies that looked for grandpa on telly

Mom: Again? Why do you keep touching this wound, I don't want to hear about it anymore.

Thy: Oh? You didn't know I'm coming back to make a film about grandma?

Mom: No I didn't. You didn't say.

Thy: As I just said. I'm coming back this time to make a film about grandma.

Mom: What's so exciting to make a film about, huh?

Thy: Well nothing exciting but I am making a film to know why she is the way she is. I know nothing of her past, no? By doing this, I can ask her about this and that and get to know how she used to be.

Mom: I don't know but once you're back, I'd love for you to collect the old photos of grandma as a working woman. Very beautiful. I'd send you photos. I have madame Thu's photos too, from when your grandma was a kid. Delightful. Come home and do whatever you want then.

Thy: But you haven't answered what I asked?

Mom: What did you ask?

Thy: The telly thing. Back in the days when ladies went on telly to find grandpa, the neighbour knew too right? They must have known that there were people looking for grandpa?

Mom: Yes. They said, they said "goodness gracious there are loads of people looking for mr. Tám, don't you know?" On telly, I still remember that program, every night: "I am Nguyễn Thị Gái or Nguyễn Thị Cẩm something, looking for Mr. Nguyễn Ngọc Phó... where are you now please reconnect with your family." That message was broadcasted on telly for about a decade after 1975. To the point that it became just like an automated message. Night after night people were looking for your grandpa on television.

Thy: Woah but what channel was it broadcast on?

Mom: Back in the day we only had one channel: "The sound of Vietnam." It ended at 10pm, that's it. Only one channel of the Party's central committee and another of Ho Chi Minh city. Each night, on that channel people kept looking for your grandpa.

Thy: But they were looking for grandpa on which one? The Party's central one or HCMC's?

Mom: HCMC. That's it. Grandma has loads of photos of when she was still a working woman, going on a business trip, and photos of when she was a uni student. Very beautiful. What about coming home and making a film about me? My life is like *life of Ms Lữ*.

Thy: What should I make your film about? About you and grandma? About you going on a quest to find grandpa's mistress and make them regret the whole thing?

Mom: What? Noooo! Grandma is grandma and I am me. Make it about when I was raising chicken and pigs.

Thy: But why not a film about grandma and you?

Mom: There are no similarities. Where could you find it?

Thy: Hmmm, yeah, but in the old days, now thinking back, I don't remember clearly, but why wasn't grandma comfortable with you? Like, suddenly she became so unforgiving of you?

Mom: Well, now I think it was because of depression.

Thy: Really?

Mom: Yeah, she probably got depressed. There was no reason for a person to change like 180 degrees. Back then, I didn't know, I thought she hated me, for this and that but now thinking back, I feel for her so much. I think that's when she got sick, without me knowing. You see,

she closed off, no emotions showed, no love, stress from work, she was always surly with her staff.

She went home and got grumpy with her husband, unforgiving to her children, it became her way, and it got more and more and more. Then she kept everything and everyone out. And she got sick, like a type of schizophrenia. That's what I think. Now people say it's depression. She changed. She became surly and scolded people a lot. She grew suspicious of me, this and that and just like uncle Hải, like looking at her is not loving her this and that.. So now when thinking back, I always wonder why she became the way she was. Sometimes I did talk back and became defensive and obnoxious to her, it makes me guilty for the way I treated her. I feel like I shouldn't have been like that. I didn't know she was ill. Seeing her makes me realise that when it comes to my turn, I don't want to become like that, when I'm ill I will accept to take medications. My doctor is prescribing me with depression meds, you know. So, I'm seeking for a better mentality, and I accept to take meds from now. If not, it'd be like your brother Nhân said: "if you became like that I'm out." He said that. Back then he said that once I became like grandma he'd be out, don't ask him why he'd abandon me. He said it without thinking. I think it's not that I fear people would leave me but first and foremost I'd be the one in misery. Before your grandma reached this stage of deterioration, she must have been in so much mental pain for so long. And you know what, not only would I be in misery, but you guys, my children also. So no matter whatever makes me happy and relaxed a bit, even medications, I'd try to take it to help me escape... First just not thinking of maladies and pain, getting out of the boring familial pattern. And to escape depression, and to not fall into psychological illnesses. The way I see your grandma now is someone with psychological illnesses.

You know what, for a while, she kept mentioning Mr.Năm and Ms.Chín, but those people died a long time ago. Now your grandma keeps saying: "I could not sleep last night, the children were so frisky." Your grandma keeps mentioning the children. When I asked which children, she said: "your two children, they wet the bed, lucky that my pants weren't wet, if my pants got wet yesterday, I wouldn't have pants to wear today." That's what she said. Last week, she said it again. She keeps saying the children are so frisky at night, she had to fan you guys to sleep, that's why she couldn't sleep. She keeps saying that. Yeah, but in the past, when she complained she couldn't sleep, I always gave her medications. Now I could see that it wasn't it. But now grandma has overcome it. People used to tell me why didn't I bring grandma to see a psychiatrist and let her take medications, don't let her plunge deep into mental illnesses and depression. But back then grandma was well-aware, she didn't believe in taking meds and stuff. Even now she keeps asking me what the medications are. She doesn't really understand my explanation but only takes meds after I explain. I told her these meds are for bone density, to relieve joint pain, only then would she take the medications. Now I feel so sad. I feel bad for her. That's why I don't want to follow that path. I want to hang out, I want to live an easy life. I don't want to work so much, not anymore. I'd be the most miserable one, then it's my children. Like when I was so miserable, I thought of when grandma was so unforgiving to me. And locked me out. When she had no one, she rather leaned on uncle Hải, Ms. Nguyệt (my uncle's wife) and when Cánh Cam (their daughter) buttered her up, she listened to them. Now it's like she's regained more consciousness, she treats me differently.

Thy: Mmmm, but back then when did grandma begin to expose this kind of personality trait?

Mom: Huhmmmm, it has been more than ten years Thy. I think more than 15 years. From when... I have a photo here. I have the photo of your birthday party, with grandma, taken at home. When you come home I'll show you. Back when you were studying at Trần Quốc Thảo primary school.

Thy: When I was in elementary?

Mom: Yeah elementary. Back then you threw parties at home. When you were in grade 01 or 02. There was that girl named Hoàng Anh standing in our living room. And grandma went out to take a photo with you but at that time, using your words, her face was grumpy. That was when. More than 15 years now. She hasn't been happy since. She carries within her things like her children didn't take her in, they abandoned her, so she has to go stay with her son in law. That was when it started, I remember you were in grade 01 or 02, you were happily there in the party then we were calling for grandma to come out and take a photo but it took so long. The photo is still here, I still remember, don't know if you do, you were so young. I think she changed from then. It got worse. After uncle Hải treated her the way he did, it was like when people were treated in psychiatry, being taken back into a state of shock. After that they either got better, back to normal, or awoken. So when Uncle Hải and his wife insulted her and threatened to stab her this and that, it was like a shock to her. After the shock she realised that oh her daughter which is me, being treated that way was unjust, so she changed. That's how I reason. I don't know much to be honest. Psychology can be so weird. Not my expertise, so I don't know.

Thy: But you only know of psychology a very long time after all this?

Mom: I realise that uhm that I have been aware of this for a year now. I let your grandma stay in Cu Chi. At first when I offered to take her there she didn't agree. But after she moved there, she was far away from the hatred environment in which she used to be with me. She used to be so grumpy with me. She had been so used to it. In her new environment, she doesn't remember the times when I used to come back from work and ask her many questions like: have you eaten? Have you taken a shower? This and that. She hated it. But when she's in Cu Chi, she forgets all that. And I know, so I don't repeat those words again.

Remember you used to tell me that grandma is now a child, and do I see that you got pissed off whenever you were asked that many questions. That's what grandma is now. That one time you told me, made me aware. Now I see that grandma is nothing more than a kid. She sulks a lot, saying she hasn't eaten while she did, when it's yes, she says no; when it's no, she says yes. So sometimes I think she lies. But it's all wrong. It's just her personality changes. So when she stays in Cu Chi, she lives alone with Ms Hai. She gets rid of all usual habits. She's okay in Cu Chi but whenever she comes back to our house in HCMC, she starts rummaging through things again. Sets foot in our house and at night she rummages. She rummages through the stairs and my purse. But one thing is that now when she rummages through my purse and sees me, she gets startled and pretends she doesn't know, asking: "honey, what is this?" Sometimes she's fully conscious like once your paternal grandma asks "who's that" and she replies "my daughter, who do you think she is?" and when your paternal grandma asks your grandma she says "it's God's child." See, she even cracks jokes. That's why I think, when I take her back to HCMC, the environment makes her grumpy and angry. I am aware that for about a year now, her physical body is no longer hers. No mother hates her children talking bad behind their backs. Maybe at that time she got sick already. So she has no longer been herself. But now, when I come to visit, sitting next to her for a while, she asks "when did you arrive?"

As you would see this time, it is so different from before. No more sulking. I think the things in the past were because she was so sick. Dad, he said this for a very long time. He said don't be sad just think that mum was sick. Yeah. But dad only told me to think of it that way, now as I think back, she was actually sick. Ah, stop! Speaking about this makes me tired. My head hurts.

**Conversation with my mother – Trang, after she read the "hate mail"**  
**April 18th 2021**

Thy: Now reading the letter, how do you feel?

Trang: I cannot believe that I wrote it while turning 18. And now I feel regretful. Regret the 40-year which has gone by yet life isn't what I have always wanted. It's about my own family with my parents, our family, with you guys and your father is different. Grandmother went through sad adulthood and I didn't get to be with my family.

Thy: Are you mad now, thinking back?

Trang: No, no longer mad. I am sad, for things have passed, but no longer angry. When you're no longer angry, when you've cleared everything, there's no longer any chance to reconcile. When I get it all, I cannot be with my parents to have a happy family life, no more. I regret that I didn't have the chance to be close to my parents. With grandfather, just the recent years. With your grandmother, she was distant from me, and she didn't talk much to anyone. Until now, when she started to be more open to others, her memories mostly faded away. I don't have many memories with my parents. I float alone, living on my own.

Thy: When did you start to understand?

\*pause for a while\*

Trang: To my understanding, maybe 10 or 20 years now, but for me to pass it by and to share, it was very recent.

Thy: What made you pass things by?

Trang: Because I had been through a lot in the course of my life. Life is impermanent. One should not sulk and at that time, grandfather had already been very remorseful of what happened. So I thought that I shouldn't (be mad), things have their rights and wrongs. That's why I stopped sulking and being sad.

Thy: Do you think that what happened to your family was because of the war?

Trang: Yes. Because of the separation, when grandfather came back home, he had to start over. In that starting-over period of time, there were too many conflicts and disagreements between grandmother and him, together with other objective impacts; the women who enjoyed being between our family. I think that was what took away my happiness, the involvement of others.

Thy: Why didn't you send this letter?

Trang: I was so sad. I wanted to write it all down. But I didn't send it. I don't really understand what I was feeling at that moment.

Thy: Do you think it would have turned out differently if you sent the letter?

Trang: Maybe.

Thy: But you have done your best?

Trang: Yes, I cannot do any better. But I cannot make it up for myself the parental love that I didn't receive.

Thy: But now you still have grandmother here, to take care of?

Trang: Yes, but I take care of your grandmother like taking care of a baby. I talk to her, but she doesn't talk to me back. Well, I'm settled with it now, I took care of your grandfather till he was 86. Life is never peaceful so now I feel alright.

Trang: I didn't know that I still had the letter. I was afraid that grandmother would know so I sent it to Ms Diem Hong's address.

Thy: Why were you afraid?

Trang: Because she was mad at grandfather, yet I tried to contact him, I was afraid that she would be upset.

Trang: And I have one more regret was that when I was younger I didn't hang out enough. Because I was afraid of making grandmother upset so I felt as if I was obliged to take care of grandmother her whole life, putting my personal life and needs second to that. Now as I recall everything, I would have hanged out more, with your dad, on Christmas Eves, go dating on Valentine's day. I would have lived more of my younger years.

Thy: It's not too late now, mum.

Trang: Yes, that's why on our 30th anniversary, we left the house and went to Dalat for a concert. I'm still hot enough to be your father's lover, aren't I?

\*both laughing\*



## APPENDIX B - Translated letters

*The letters below have been translated from Vietnamese into English by Thy.*

### **Grandma's letter to Thy**

Thy,

Grandmother is very sad when I write this for you

Grandmother loves both of my grandchildren, Nhân and Thy

These two nights I cannot sleep because of what you said

When Thy carried the bag, I asked you where you were going, and you replied going to Da Nang for business. The whole night I thought of what you said, why you have to go so far just to look for a job?

Thy! Can you talk to me directly?

I want to write more for you but cannot do that for what you said before you go, to find a job far from your parents and me. I love you so much but you're so distant to me. I see that your parents are very sad, and I too, but didn't dare to say anything. If you love me, talk to me so I can resolve your sadness with you.

So sad, my dear granddaughter!

Your Grandmother.

### **Trang's "hate mail" to Phó**

18/08/1982

To my respected father!

Father! You must be so surprised, no? Because of what is left of a girl whose dad has neglected her.

But to me, it's totally different, father! I am no longer your little girl Trang from the past. It has been 17 years and my 18 birthday is coming near. During those 17 years, the times I got to say the word "father" could be counted on the fingers of my hands. I cannot remember how many times I wanted to see you and write to you, but as I feel sorry for myself for I have been neglected and estranged by you makes it hard for me to move forward. You must be so mad at me!

Father! 12 years of studying, my 12 years of schooling have passed, now I am ready to take a step into real life, to really be in the hardships of a real-life that is full of obstacles and deceptions.

The days I was off from school, waiting for the university test results allowed me to think and relive all that happened to me, to my unfortunate and unhappy life.

Just like all other kids, being born and raised by one's parents then welcomed into society to thrive. But for me, you do know that in the course of my not-that-long lived life, I have never been loved wholeheartedly. Until now, I'm still the victim of such conflict. I don't dare to accuse you, and I don't dare to condemn mother, but have you ever let me know the truth about you? Maybe my thoughts now aren't that mature, but it must be much more mature than before.

Do you know, when I was little, you were always away, I only know you from my imagination. You still remember when you came back from the Soviet Union, I hid behind the door and said that it wasn't my father, don't you remember?

As I grew up, I rarely got chances to be with you thus I didn't know anything. I only know how harsh mother was and how distant you were and how broken our family was. All I could do was cry and be sad.

I want to forget it all to study as well as my friends. Sometimes I go to class and friends talk about their family, they tell me what they got for birthdays, and that their parents take them to school, thinking of myself who don't even get chances to call you father, let alone getting birthday gifts and all. I felt so sorry for myself, father. I had to leave, to find a corner to soothe myself. What would you feel, if you were a girl like I am?

The day marked the end of my 12th grade, my friends invited their parents to be at the gift-giving ceremony, their parents were so happy yet I was there, on the stage with no loving eyes looking at me and no happy smiles from anyone. Should I be sorry for myself then, father?

I just finished the two exams, the end of high school exam and the university entrance exam, I'd got to travel to Chợ Lớn. My friends had their parents with them, taking care of them, worried that travelling would be dangerous, and worried for their mental wellbeing, so most parents got their children there and waited to pick them up after. I had nobody. In the morning, all my friends were surprised: "you've got no one?" I was so sad, I just wanted to cry out loud.

When I got to the exam room, I couldn't remember a thing, I was so sad, I wanted to go home and left it all, but I tried to repress it all to finish the exams. In the afternoon, friends were picked up by their parents to go home and have lunch. I sat in a corner at school with a banh-mi. I have read so many books of people who are famous and talented, and many had their parents backing them up. It hurts me father, it hurts me so bad. If it was hatred, I would seek revenge but this... I don't know what to do, all I can is to accept my fate, father! I know I'm not the only one in pain, maybe you are too. Do you miss and still love the child you made and neglected? When I was younger I only felt my own pain. Maybe because I made you sad too much. Can you forgive me? It was the behaviours and speeches sprung from the pain of a child.

What about you. I have heard once, you said that I'd get it when I grew up. Now I really want to get it, but how to get it, I have to ask you.

Now I have grown up, you cannot say that I was on your side or my mother's side, I understand and can distinguish right from wrong, father! I want to understand, I want to seek revenge for my pain. However, please help me find out who is the enemy that destroys the happiness of my life, father! Would you still say that to me that I wasn't your daughter and neglect me like you used to do?

I hope that the Sun will come back after long nights of darkness, father.

My most respected father, I am sad and ashamed with friends, I wish for myself a happy life like what they have, but that only happens to me in dreams and when I open my eyes, I have to go back to real life.

I'm now getting busy with my young-adult life, the young-adult life I carry with much sadness. I will try my best, studying and working with all the strength of my youth, like what you did before. It's time for me to create endless happiness for myself.

I gotta stop writing. I will talk more with you, another time.

I wish you good health and happiness.

Yours,

NNCT

Ps: If you send a letter to me, then follow the address: Cao Thi Diem Hong  
19 Le Dai Hanh Residence (For Chau Trang)

# Illustrations

*The following images are contributions from the author, who maintains the copyright.*

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Figure 18 – Photograph of Phó, my grandfather in his uniform, n.d [re-photographed by phone]

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## Other illustrations

Figure 7 – The whole neighborhood in Vietnam gathers to watch TV - Nguyễn, P., n.d. *Nhớ chuyện nghe nhìn ngày xưa*. [online] Tạp chí Đáng Nhớ. Available at: <<https://dangnho.com/doi-song/ky-su/nho-chuyen-nghe-nhin-ngay-xua.html>> [Accessed 19 April 2021].

Figure 8– A man and a woman watching a film footage of the Vietnam war on a television in their living room - Leffler, W., 1968. *A man and a woman watching a film footage of the Vietnam war on a television in their living room*. [image] Available at: <<https://www.loc.gov/item/2011661230/>> [Accessed 20 April 2021].

Figure 9 – Opening scene from *Sandy Lives* or *Đời Cát* - *Sandy Lives*. 1999. [film] Directed by T. Nguyen. Vietnam.

Figure 13 - Giang got into a fight because her classmates said she doesn't have a father - *Sandy Lives*. 1999. [film] Directed by T. Nguyen. Vietnam.

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*Figure 25 - Jeanne Sitting in The Living Room - Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels.* 1975. [film] Directed by A. Chantal. Belgium.

*Figure 27 – Nelly having lunch with Akerman - No Home Movie.* 2015. [film] Directed by C. Akerman. France.

*Figure 29 - First scene of No Home Movie - No Home Movie.* 2015. [film] Directed by C. Akerman. France.

*Figure 31 - Nelly on Skype - No Home Movie.* 2015. [film] Directed by C. Akerman. France.

*Figure 51 - Still from Surname Viet, Given Name Nam - Surname Viet, Given Name Nam.* 1989. [film] Directed by T. Trinh. USA.



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